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CRITICAL ASPECTS OF THE
ARAB-ISRAELI SITUATION

Submitted by the

DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

Concurred in by the

INTELLIGENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

on 28 February 1956. Concurring were the Special Assistant, Intelligence, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Director of Naval Intelligence; the Director of Intelligence, USAF; and the Deputy Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the IAC and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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CRITICAL ASPECTS OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI SITUATION

THE PROBLEM

To estimate which are the most dangerous aspects of the Arab-Israeli situation over the next year, and at what periods they are likely to be most critical.

THE ESTIMATE

1. We continue to believe that Soviet arms support for the Arabs has substantially increased the chances of Arab-Israeli hostilities, in that (a) Israel may risk or even initiate such hostilities while it still enjoys military superiority over the Arabs, and (b) the Arabs' growing military strength may increase their militancy and the explosive potential of border clashes and stimulate Arab readiness for a "second round."¹

THE ROLE OF THE GREAT POWERS

2. *The US.* Any estimate of this situation requires the caveat that both Israeli and Arab courses of action, now and for the foreseeable future, will be influenced to a considerable extent by the policies of the US and other Western powers, or by what the parties to the conflict consider such policies to be. We continue to believe, for example, that if both sides could be convinced that the US was prepared to use any means necessary to penalize aggression, it is almost certain that neither side would deliberately initiate hostilities. However, it would be extremely difficult to convince both parties on this point.

3. Recent US actions with respect to the shipment of tanks to Saudi Arabia have almost certainly affected Arab and Israeli attitudes.

While the Israelis may be disappointed by the fact that the blocking of the Saudi tank shipment did not stick, they almost certainly believe that the episode has made it considerably harder for the US to refuse their own urgent request for arms. They will make the strongest efforts in the next few weeks along these lines. The decision to suspend the shipment almost certainly reinforced the belief of most Arabs that US vulnerability to Zionist pressures is a major consideration in US policy toward the Middle East. The subsequent reversal of this decision has probably not significantly affected this belief, though the Arabs have probably been encouraged by the unblocking of the Saudi arms shipment to believe that the US also remains vulnerable to Arab pressures, largely because of its fear of increased Arab collaboration with the USSR, reinforced by Western need for access to oil-producing and base areas of the Middle East.

4. *Effects of US Arms to Israel.* Virtually any shipment of US arms to Israel would entail adverse effects on the US position in the Arab states. Most US representatives in the area have stressed the danger of such US action, and the possibility that it might lead to a rupture of Arab relations with the US and to greatly increased Arab cooperation with the Bloc. Certainly the first reactions of the Arab leaders in these states would be highly emotional.

¹ SNIE 30-3-55: "Probable Consequences of the Egyptian Arms Deal with the Soviet Bloc," 12 October 1955, Top Secret.

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5. The majority of the members of the IAC² believe that if the US were to make even moderate arms shipments to Israel, there would almost certainly be a strong shift in Arab attitudes away from the West and toward the Bloc. This would be accompanied by further Arab arms purchases from the Bloc, establishment of diplomatic relations with Sino-Soviet Bloc countries by those Arab states that have not already done so, general Arab support for the admission of Communist China to the UN, violence to US governmental and private installations and personnel in the area, and moves to expel the US from the Dhahran Air Field. Any US prospects for acquiring base rights elsewhere in the area would be virtually extinguished. Saudi Arabia and Syria as well as Egypt would almost certainly turn to the Bloc for additional materiel, thus promoting an arms race in which the USSR was identified as the backer of the Arabs and the US as the backer of Israel. The governments of Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq would be under strong pressure to align themselves with the Egyptian Bloc, and in the case of Iraq, to withdraw from the Baghdad Pact. The presently somewhat dim prospects for achieving a settlement of the Jordan water issue would be virtually eliminated, the progress made so far in the negotiations over the Aswan Dam project would be nullified, and the day when progress could be made toward a peaceful settlement of the basic Arab-Israeli dispute would be almost indefinitely postponed. The adverse repercussions in the Arab states of a US decision to provide arms to Israel would also adversely affect the British position in the area, though these effects would be mitigated if the British disassociated themselves from the US action.³

² The Special Assistant, Intelligence, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Director of Naval Intelligence; the Director of Intelligence, USAF; and the Deputy Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff.

³ The IAC is in agreement that the Arabs would not react as strongly as estimated above to the sale of arms in moderate amounts to Israel by other non-Communist countries, particularly powers less immediately involved in Middle East affairs such as Italy, Switzerland, Sweden, or Japan. However, the Arabs would suspect any

6. The Director of Central Intelligence⁴ agrees that most of the results described in the preceding paragraph would be likely to follow from *substantial* US arms shipments to Israel. However, he believes that there is about an even chance that the most serious of the consequences described above could be avoided if US arms aid to Israel were moderate in amount, and accompanied by demonstrations of continuing US concern for Arab interests as well — including a willingness to supply them with arms and economic aid. Nevertheless, the risks to US-Arab relations from even moderate shipments would still be high. Such risks would be slightly reduced if the equipment in question was primarily designed for the role of military defense, e. g., radar, mines, antiaircraft and antitank weapons.

7.⁵ Should Israel obtain large-scale arms assistance from any source, the internal pressures for "preventive action" would be reduced, but by no means eliminated. Should the Arabs in turn obtain further large-scale arms from the Bloc or any other source, Israeli apprehensions would once again grow. It is unlikely that the Israelis could be convinced that moderate arms shipments met their essential defensive requirements.

8. *The Soviet Bloc.* The USSR's immediate objectives are probably (a) to improve its own position in the Arab states, at Western expense, and (b) to force the West to accept the USSR as a participant in Middle East affairs. The USSR probably estimates that Arab-Israeli tension and flare-ups short of war will continue to provide it with substantial opportunities to court the Arab side, either through political support in the UN and elsewhere, or through arms and other material

large-scale shipments of being sanctioned if not sponsored by the US and if these suspicions appeared to them to be confirmed they would react almost as strongly as if the US itself had made the shipments. Arab suspicions and reaction would be greatest in the case of shipments by countries closely identified with the US and least strong if shipments were made by such countries as Sweden or Switzerland.

⁴ In contrast to the majority, identified in the first footnote to paragraph 5.

⁵ The IAC is in agreement on this paragraph and all subsequent paragraphs in this estimate.

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assistance. If the Western Powers should seek to deter or prevent hostilities by declaring their determination to intervene, the USSR would probably charge them with "imperialist" designs on the sovereignty of the states involved, and would also renew demands that the USSR and the UN be included in any efforts to resolve the situation. Should an Arab-Israeli war break out, the USSR is almost certainly prepared to exploit such a development, by extending diplomatic and possibly materiel support to the Arab participants and through efforts to play a leading role in UN peacemaking moves.

CRITICAL PERIODS

9. The precise time at which the risk of major Arab-Israeli hostilities is likely to be greatest depends upon a number of undeterminable factors. As indicated above, the future actions of the great powers, including the US, will significantly affect the choice and execution of policy by Israel and the Arab states in the developing situation. Moreover, there remains a continuing possibility of tensions developing to the breaking point at any time.

10. However, generalizations can be made on the basis of the developing military situation. At present, Israel is capable of defeating all Arab armed forces which might be deployed against it. We have estimated that it will be at least late 1956 before Egypt's new Soviet ground equipment can effectively be used in unit operations. While at least as long a period probably would be required for full and effective absorption of all reportedly purchased jet fighters and bombers, the Egyptian air force is already capable of mounting air attacks against Israel. In these circumstances, we consider the following periods to be critical with respect to the dangers indicated.

11. *Deliberate Initiation of Hostilities by Israel.* We believe that the Israeli government has not as yet reached a final decision with respect to launching full-scale hostilities. Israel will probably tread softly so long as it has active hope of obtaining Western arms and political support. At the same time, the Israelis almost certainly estimate that after

the Arabs have acquired and absorbed Bloc arms, Arab military capabilities will be superior to their own, and that the pressure on certain Arab governments to use these capabilities will become difficult to resist. The Israelis are most immediately concerned about growing Egyptian air strength, which already poses a threat of air attack against Israeli cities.

12. If the Israelis were to lose hope of obtaining Western arms at a time when they still had substantial military superiority, the situation would enter a crucial phase. Israel might then decide on "preventive action," in a desperate effort to destroy Arab military power while there was still time, particularly if Israel had at the same time concluded that its integrity would not be effectively safeguarded by the Western Powers or by UN action. On the basis of military considerations, the temptation to take such action would be greatest during this coming spring and early summer.⁵ Thereafter, the likelihood of such Israeli action would decline, since growing Arab military strength would make it an increasingly risky proposition for Israel.

13. *Deliberate Initiation of Hostilities by the Arabs.* Despite rising Arab apprehension of an early Israeli attack, the Nasr regime will probably seek to avoid war with Israel, at least while the Soviet arms are being absorbed. Barring serious Israeli provocations, other Arab states will probably follow the same course. However, important elements of the Egyptian armed forces are likely to be over-optimistic as to the state of their operational readiness, and pressure from this source will be an important element in formulation of Egyptian policy. If at a later stage the Arabs actually gain military superiority, the chances of Arab aggression would markedly increase. Whether or not they would actually launch a "second round" would depend on their assess-

⁵ Both Egyptian and Jordanian estimates accord with this, the Arab Legion naming May as the critical month, while the Egyptians talk in terms of 1 March to 1 June as the likely period. UNTSO chief, General Burns, has also described the next few months as the most critical with respect to Israeli aggression.

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ment of how far the Western Powers would go to preserve the status quo and of how much support they could expect from the USSR in event of hostilities.

14. *Accidental Hostilities.* In the meantime, both Israeli apprehension and Arab confidence will probably develop faster than actual changes in respective military capabilities take place. The border situation will continue to be dangerous, as both sides remain touchy about asserting their rights against real or fancied offenses, and unable or unwilling to halt frequent exchanges of fire. The present deployment of the major elements of the Egyptian army in the Sinai area and of most of the Syrian army in positions near the Israeli border adds to the danger of an accidental outbreak of hostilities. In these conditions, Arab harassments of Israel through terrorist activity, or a resumption of Israeli tactics of planned reprisal will continue to involve risks of full-scale war even though neither side may desire it.

MAIN POTENTIAL TROUBLE SPOTS

15. Areas or issues where hostilities could erupt without either side desiring them or which could be used by either side as justification for the initiation of hostilities include:

a. Banat Yacub. This is a critical spot, in view of Israel's avowed intention to proceed with diversion of the Jordan River in the Israeli-Syrian demilitarized zone if the Arabs fail to accept the Jordan Valley Development Plan. If Israeli resumption of the project were not deterred or quickly halted by UN or Western action, Syria would probably fire on the workmen and provoke Israeli retaliation. Should hostilities develop, Egypt would probably give military support to the Syrians. The Saudis would almost certainly encourage Arab resistance by extensive financial support and Jordan would probably become involved, and possibly Iraq and even Lebanon. While Israel has announced that it would not resume the project on the 1 March deadline, in order to allow further US efforts to secure Arab acceptance of the Jordan Valley scheme, it is not likely indefinitely to delay this project in view of its urgent desire to proceed with

water development, its claim that the project is justified by Israeli acceptance of the Johnston Plan, and the question of prestige now involved in this issue.

b. Lake Tiberias. Syrian firing on Israeli fishing boats on this lake was the alleged reason for Israel's raid on Syrian forces near Lake Tiberias in December 1955. There have been several such firing incidents since then. Further incidents and reprisals remain probable, particularly in the next month or so during the remainder of the fishing season.

c. The Gulf of Aqaba. Premier Ben-Gurion has on various occasions in the past voiced his determination to end the Egyptian blockade of Elath, by military means if necessary. He has not talked publicly in these terms for several months, and there is some evidence that both Egypt and Israel are seeking to avoid trouble on this issue at this time. However, the possibility of Israeli military action remains, either as part of a policy designed to keep up pressure on the Arabs or in order to obtain the long-term advantages of the port of Elath. Israel would seek to justify any military action in this respect by citing as the initial provocation the Egyptian blockade of Israeli shipping in the Suez Canal in violation of UN resolutions.

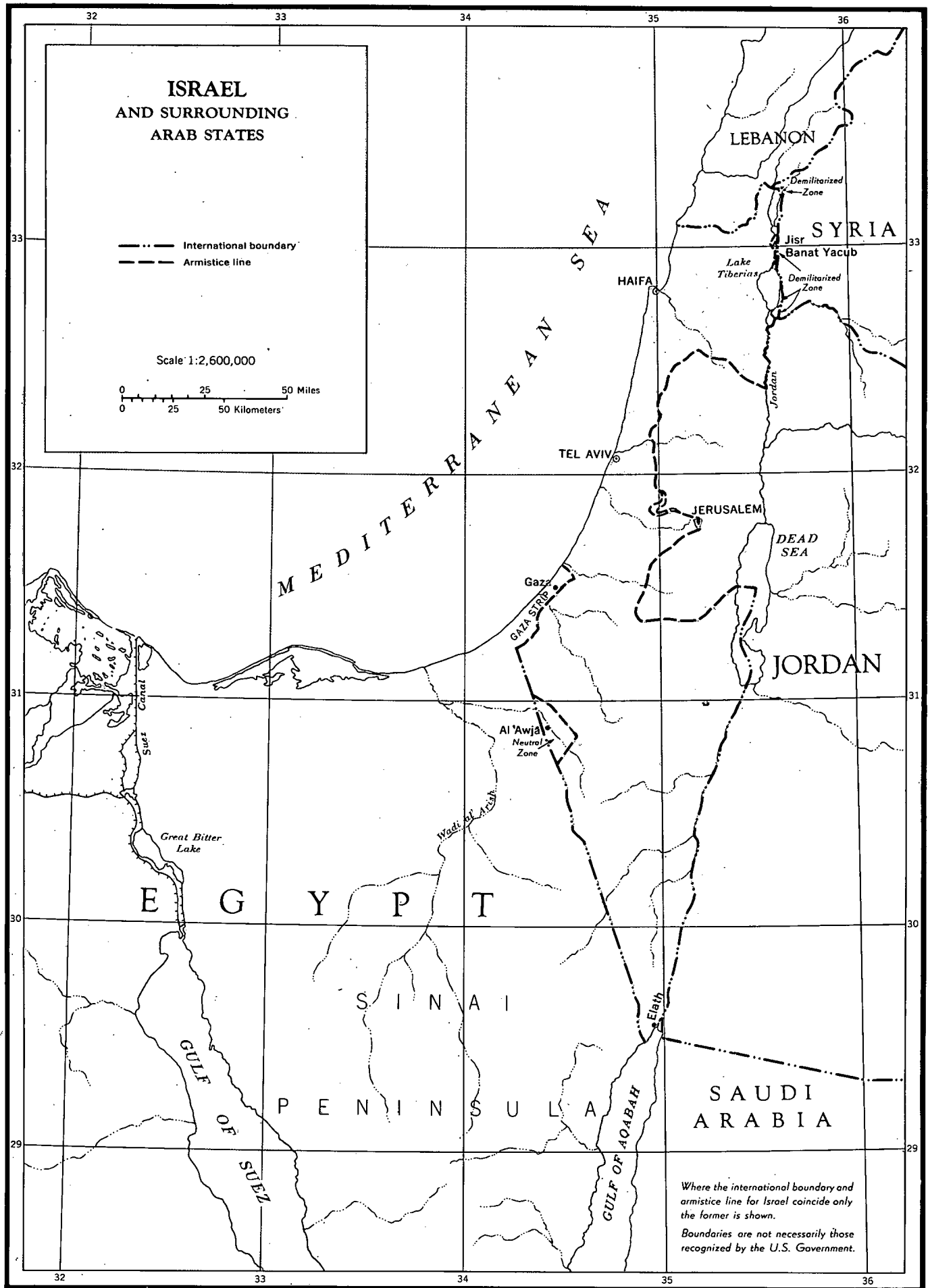
d. The El Auja Zone. Although incidents in this area have largely ceased in recent weeks, continued proximity of Egyptian and Israeli forces there, and the failure of both sides to implement (after accepting) UNTSO proposals to lessen local tensions, make this a potential scene of further border clashes and reprisal raids.

e. The Gaza Strip. This area continues to be both the scene of sporadic exchanges of fire, and a source of harassments of Israel by refugee elements, inviting Israeli reprisals.

f. The Jordanian Border. The armistice line, which divides many villages from their former wells and fields, has in the past been the scene of many incidents, some serious. Forays across this border have lately been less frequent, but tensions within Jordan, increasing Saudi and Egyptian activity there, and waning British influence create an inflammatory situation.

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